THE HOLOCAUST AND THE ALBANIAN SALVATION

Albania rescued at least 3280 Jews

In January 2005, the United Nations Organization designated 27 January as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This day was established in the memory of Holocaust victims before and throughout WWII, when millions of European citizens, including six million Jews, were annihilated. The Albanian Parliament endorsed this day and called it "The Day of Remembrance". Albania, a sanctuary for many Jews in 1933-1944, organizes relevant activities each year. The outstanding book "Kristallnacht" by Sir Martin Gilbert vividly shows the systematic and increasingly atrocious persecution of Jews in 1933-1945.

The Jewish community existed in Germany for 2000 years. It had entirely integrated into the German culture and way of life. Apart from the wounded, 12'000 Jews fell in the battles of WWI as German soldiers, and many received military decorations. In January 1933, a Nazi regime came to power in Germany, and systematic discrimination began without delay against Jews there. Overnight, half a million German Jews, who constituted 0.76% of the population, were identified by Nazi propaganda as the cause of Germany's defeat in WWI and the economic calamities that followed.

In 1933, the German government issued 42 laws against Jews restricting their citizenship rights of employment and education. The decrees ordered the exclusion of all Jews from government-related jobs, including schools and universities. Throughout 1934, the German government introduced 19 new laws explicitly targeting Jews. In 1935, 29 other laws were purposely introduced against Jews, e.g., preventing marriages between a Jew and a non-Jew and devaluating the German citizenship for Jews and those with Jewish origin. In 1936-1937, another set of 46 laws got issued against Jews. On 12 March 1938, Austria joined Germany, and thus 185'000 Austrian Jews became subject to the Nazi regime. On 17 August 1938, a law passed ordering all male Jews to have the name "Israel", and all-female Jews have "Sarah" added to their documents and papers. On 15 October 1938, German authorities considered the passports held by German Jews and Austrian Jews invalid.

The date of 10 November 1938 carved its place in history as *Kristallnacht* – The Night of Broken Glass. This day was the climax of five years and nine months of orderly persecution against German and Austrian Jews. On this day and night, according to a preliminary plan, the stormtroopers and Nazi youth attacked, destroyed, burned, and desecrated everything Jewish in every village, town, and city. More than 1000 synagogues got burnt, and devastation fell on thousands of Jewish shops and houses. Mobs mercilessly assaulted passing Jews in the streets. Ninety-one Jews got killed, and 30'000 Jewish males aged 16 to 60 were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The harsh situation continued, and all Jewish newspapers, magazines, and businesses got shut down. Jews faced prohibition entering places of recreation, universities, etc. Since there was no state of war with other countries, hundreds of foreign journalists recorded the events and subsequently published them in western newspapers. The "Night of Broken Glass" was a turning point for humanity as it changed its perception of Nazism. That night was like an echo from the year 1543. During that year, spiritual professor Martin Luther (born on 10 November 1483) wrote a letter entitled "On Jews and their lies". In the letter, he noted that "Jewish synagogues should be burnt, their homes should be destroyed, their money confiscated, and their liberty curtailed for the sake of God."

On 19 November 1938, German authorities initially banned the continuance of official emigration of Jews from Germany and Austria and then imposed a conditional recommencement for relocation. Those conditions included: full payment of an indemnity of one billion Deutsche Marks, each Jewish family had to pay off all its liabilities, and all Jews had to return their passports. Only when those terms got satisfied would Germany recommence emigration. From the Nazis came to power in January 1933 until September 1939, German politics purposely pushed to increase Jewish migration and relocation. It included the stealthy insertion of young Jews into Palestine under the British Mandate in cooperation with the Jewish leaders there. As a result, 78'000 Jews emigrated from Germany in the first nine months of 1939, compared to 40'000 Jews who emigrated from Germany in 1938.

Up to July 1938, Switzerland had received 14'000 Jews from Germany and Austria, though there were still 300'000 Jews who were looking for an escape. As the number of Jews trying to flee increased, at the same time, the rules for their acceptance by other countries became tighter. Having a receiving quota of 25'000 German emigrants per year, the USA received 200'000 Jews from Germany and Austria between January 1933 and September 1939. Having its receiving percentage, Britain allowed 65'000 Jews to enter in the same period. Between January 1933 and March 1938, Britain issued 35'000 emigration certificates for German Jews joining British Palestine. Due to the Arab revolt in 1936 and the restrictions that followed, emigration to British Palestine began to shrink. As to the Far East, in total, 18'000 Jews immigrated to Shanghai, China.

Between January 1933 and September 1939, approximately 325'000 Jews (about 2/3) had fled Germany. For the period between March 1938 and September 1939, 130'000 Jews (70% of the population) had fled Austria. In September 1939, there were still 230'000 Jews in the Third Reich that had denied immigration visas because they were considered citizens of a country at war with countries they were asking for entrance visas. Out of these, 10'000 Jews survived WWII; 4700 Jewish men lived due to their German women's protest, and the rest hidden by their German or Austrian friends.

From the beginning of WWII until its end, millions of European Jews fell under the Nazi regime. They faced arrest, destruction of their property, violence, expulsion from living places, family partition, and mass murder in points of arrest and concentration camps. These camps located as follows: Germany 20, Poland 11, France and Norway 4 each, Serbia and Holland 3 each; Italia, Estonia and Latvia 2 each; Austria, Belgium, Romania, Ukraine, Croatia, Lithuania, White Russia, Czechoslovakia, and the Channel Islands had one each. Many of these concentration camps quickly became extermination camps.

After the Night of the Broken Glass, the desperate situation compelled Jews to flee by all means and go wherever they could. Many were unable to protect their children, their families, or even save themselves. Throughout that time, those who did not stand indifferent tried to help the Jewish population. In Germany and Austria, foreign diplomats and non-government associations based in Britain were at the center of the salvation efforts. U.S. and Britain-based governmental and civic projects started to settle the fleeing Jews in Britain, the U.S., and other countries.

Jews of Germany and Austria who had fled to Italy soon began leaving there because of laws introduced against them by Mussolini's government two days before the Night of the Broken Glass. Nearby, on 30 December 1939, a ship on Danube River with 1310 Jews on board bound for British Palestine was, on British government demand, stopped by Yugoslavian authorities that put all Jews to jail in the town of Shabac. After six months, 207 Jews under 16-years old received immigration certificates for British Palestine. The remaining 1003 Jews perished when the German Army occupied Yugoslavia in April 1941. The Bulgarian Army gathered Jews in Macedonia and its occupied areas of Greece and transported them to Poland's extermination camps. The German Army did the same in its zones of Greece. Many never got to the campsites because they died on the journey due to confinement, inadequate nutrition, and lack of drinking water.

Despite the many atrocities, one country stands dignified in this story. Between the years 1933 and 1944, Albania in the Southeast of Europe saved her own Jews and any Jew who could reach her borders. The fact is that all Jews survived in Albania. They were not intruded on or surrendered. They had no prohibition for entering the country because there were no immigration quotas on them. They suffered no robbery, and no one took their possessions. They were not disturbed by any customary law. In other words, they found salvation by every Albanian they encountered, by everyone who opened a knocked door, or Albanian official who touched their papers or had their lists, and by every Albanian who did not stand indifferent. The salvation was full and had proof in a parallel fact. After the Italian Army capitulation in September 1943, at least 25'000 Italian soldiers also went into hiding and were saved in Albania. It was common for an Albanian family to conceal either Italians or Jews during that time. Independent of religious faith, the entire Albanian population responded directly or indirectly as a unified culture by resisting the Holocaust and saving all Jews within its reach. There was not one Jew in Albania who perished due to the Holocaust. At the same time, fourteen Jews got killed either in battles as members of the anti-fascist Albanian forces or the fire line.

Albania was a saving ark for persecuted Jews. Traces of evidence exist in the towns and villages of Mitrovica, Prishtina, Gjilan, Deçan, Peja, Gjakova, Shkodra, Kruja, Tirana, Berat, Kavaja, Durrës, Elbasan, Librazhd, Korça, Dibra, Burrel, Fier, Lushnje, Vlora, Delvina, Përmet, Gjinokastra, etc. Jews fled toward Albania and Albanian regions because they knew they would not suffer persecution by the people or government. They knew that no receiving quotas existed, no religious or national contempt, no genocides

against other nationals, and Albania was a sanctuary. Jews knew that Albanians had Besa, which means to open the door to anyone in need. They knew that the government wanted to advance the economy. They also recognized that Albanian-Jews lived a life like everyone else. According to the Census of 1931, Albania had 204 resident Jews. According to records, Kosova had about 409 resident Jews until the occupation of ex-Yugoslavia in April 1941. Those, together with folks coming from ex-Yugoslavia and other countries who escaped to Kosova, were saved by relocation to inner Albania.

A complementary source of information regarding Albania's role in saving Jews comes from Apostol Kotani and Shaban Sinani. Apostol Kotani's book "Albanians and Jews throughout the Centuries, 4th Ed., 2013 (in print)" unifies his 40 years of work recording narrations of people in different locations, collecting both existing evidence and scattered pieces of facts, and his research of archived documents as well. Shaban Sinani researched archived documents in Albania and combined the findings in his book "Jews in Albania: The Presence and Salvation, 2009". It is also a list of 2264 rescued Jews compiled by the Central Archive staff of Albania led by Shaban Sinani and posted since 2005 at the U.S. Memorial Museum of Holocaust in Washington D.C. In addition to further research, another supply of information is a list of saved Jews collected by the Friendship Association Kosova-Israel "Dr. Haim Abravanel".

Combining these sources of information with the feedback received from family members on these lists revealed at least **3280** Jews saved in Albania up to the end of WWII. This number does not include Jews who entered Albania with false passports or names (e.g., with Albanian names on Albanian papers), those who came illegally (e.g., those sheltered in villages near the border), those who might be on lists of other authors, and those not yet researched or recognized by names. The latter is emphasized because it is common to see archival records of having only the family or group leader's name and other accompanying family members as merely an attached number under the heading "together with their families". The research for the names of rescued Jews continues.

The Lieutenant of the Italian King to wartime Albania, Francesco Jacomoni, in his book "La Politica dell' Italia in Albania (The Italian Politics in Albania), Cappelli Ed. 1965", on pages 288-289, asserts the secret cooperation for saving Jews with the Albanian Prime-Minister Mustafa Merlika Kruja and the chief of Confidential Affairs Department in the Italian Foreign Ministry, Luigi Vidau. One case was the making of Albanian passports with Albanian names to more than 300 Yugoslavian Jews that had taken refuge in the Kosova region. In early April 1942, about three months after the Wannsee Conference, the German Consul General showed detailed information of Jews by name and address to the Albanian Prime Minister and required him to deliver them. Mustafa Merlika Kruja immediately sent his officials to Kosova to issue Albanian passports to those Jews and transported them to Gjinokastra in southern Albania by buses of SATA company. The reply to the German Consul General several days later was that the information had been incorrect. The second case was the secret orders by Luigi Vidau to Italian Embassies or Consulates for issuing Albanian passports with Albanian names to Jews from Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. With such passports, Jews traveled to Albania, to or through other countries, or received entry Visas into states accepting immigrants by quotas. That brings the Albanian salvation of Jews to international dimensions.

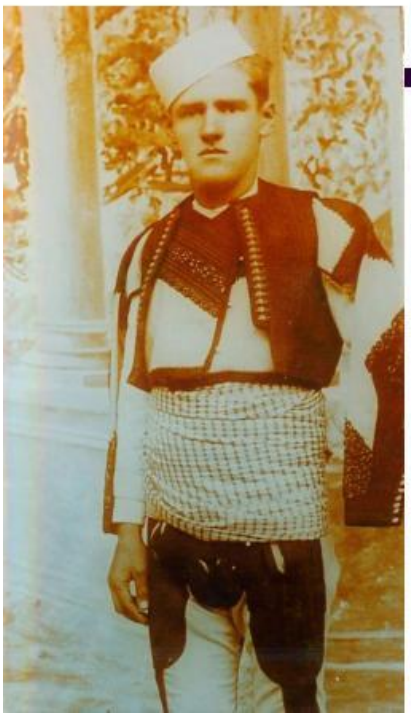
The story of Jews saved by Albanians has become a widely acknowledged fact. In Jerusalem, the Yad Vashem institution has now documented and recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" 69 Albanians for their deeds in saving Jews during the Holocaust. The knowledge of Albanian salvation spreads from the ongoing work of historians, activists of the Albanian national cause, civic associations, scholars, journalists, politicians, friends, and benevolent persons. Albanians saved Jews without the tiniest interest, without the smallest condition, without the least benefit or reward, and always preserving their memories. Jews, who were rescued in Albania and survived the Holocaust, continued on their paths either in Albania or other countries. Jews, who remained in Albania after the end of WWII, left marks in different fields. They contributed to Albanian life and are remembered with respect.

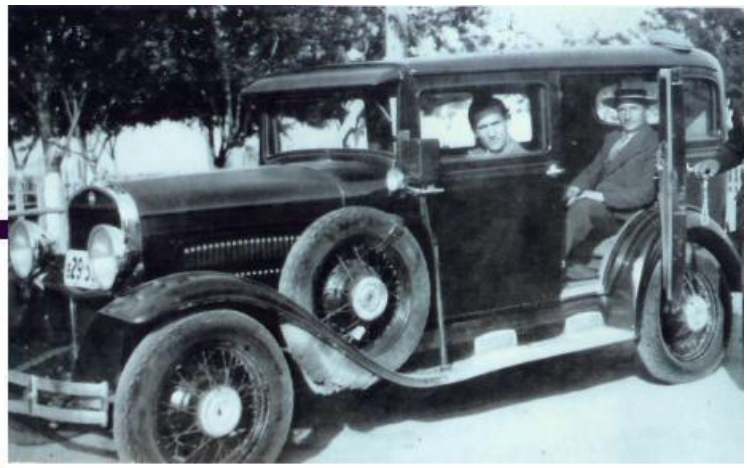
Jewish women who attended the Albanian language course, Breglumë, Berat, 1944.

Albanian and Austro-German Jewish children in front of Immigrants House, Durrës, 1939.

Jewish families in the family of Vesel Veselaj, Krujë, 1944.

Rafael Faragi in Israel (1995) with the picture of his gentile Mefail Biçaku of the village of Qarrishta, Librazhd, where 26 Jews from ex-Yugoslavia stayed as guests, 1943-1944.





Hasan Rrem Xerxa from Gjakova and his car for bringing Jews from Shkupi to Deçan and deeper to Albania.

Congressman Tom Lantos (1928-2008) was the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in the US Congress.

The exposure of the Albanian heroism during the Holocaust began with the 1990 visit of Congressman Tom Lantos and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi to Tirana.